

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING GROUP TEACHING IN DESIGN AND ART – A SPONTANEOUS EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

The project was triggered by the exhibition of fashion photography, "Zeitgeist Becomes Form, German Fashion Photography 1945-95,"¹ held at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in early 2008. The Goethe Institute sponsored Ute Mahler, a noted Berlin-based photographer who featured in the exhibition, to travel to Dunedin as part of the exhibition events. A cultural and educational experience in the form of a collaborative project was planned to include design and art students, academics and professionals.

The results of this project are reflected on here in a dialogue between two lecturers, one from the field of fashion/design and the other from photography/fine art. Through the conversation, we expose a number of issues and highlight some differences of opinion between design and art in an educational context.

The project was structured within an action research framework, with the aim of engaging a community of practice in common goals. This methodology supported and improved the understanding of professional practice and learning possibilities, which continue to develop and to inform further projects. Cohorting was an important element, and this occurred between senior students of fashion and art, as the designers and photographers, along with the models. This cohorting experience gave all participants and observers the opportunity to uncover and recognise multiple perspectives, cultural differences and the similarities of the processes and outcomes desired within each discipline.

INCEPTION

At the beginning of the 2008 tertiary year Lisa Moenchmeyer of the Goethe Institute, Wellington, contacted Lynda Cullen at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in the context of the planned arrival in April or May of a major historical exhibition – "Zeitgeist Becomes Form: German Fashion Photography 1945-1995." Lisa announced the visit to Dunedin of one of the artists shown, Ute Mahler: Professor Mahler, a teacher at the Hamburg Technical University, was, it transpired, prepared to do some teaching in Dunedin and was keen to meet interested academics and students.



Image 1: The Zoes on location: assorted photographers (including Ute Mahler), designer Nicole Hamilton and model Zoe C @ AliMcD, (photographer: Max Oettli).

To have an international fashion exhibition in Dunedin was very unusual and to have the possibility of an exhibitor within the exhibition – Ute – share her experiences with us was an extremely exciting proposition. The exhibition itself was of significant importance to all involved in fashion, design and art in Dunedin, both in education and to the wider public; having the opportunity to be part of the workshop with Ute was the icing on the cake.

We immediately saw this as a golden opportunity to have Ute work with our design and art students and, after endless e-mails and other contacts, and with the good offices of many people, notably Lisa Moenchmeyer and Christoph Moechler at the Goethe Institute, and Lynda Cullen at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, we managed to define and organise a collaborative workshop.

UTE MAHLER

It should be mentioned that we were to be in the privileged presence of a truly remarkable person with Ute Mahler. Born in the Socialist German Democratic Republic, Ute had become an important presence as a photographer there, shooting fashion and other photographic work notably for publications. The Eastern bloc has had rather bad press, but there was an innate sense of social concern and decency and self-reliance in many people who grew up under those occasionally quirky regimes. A 2006 film, *The Lives of Others*,² gives a picture at once of the drabness of life and of the self-help, and the deeply pragmatic strategies used by those who worked in the somewhat rocky field of culture there. Ute and Werner; her husband, had a quiet and sure sense of where things were going, a level-headed and humanistic approach to their photography and a finely tuned pedagogic instinct.



Image 2: Ute and Werner Mahler; (photographer: Max Oettli).

METHODOLOGY

It was apparent from the start that the project had to be not only about teaching, but also about learning together and coming up with solutions and strategies as a group, sharing our inputs, competencies and outcomes.

Problem-based learning (PBL), a well-known teaching strategy applied notably in medical teaching, was utilised as the teaching methodology. This technique uses the dynamic of a group with an important overlap of professional practice and education, and with the capacity for each individual to function within it as a representative of her or his own culture and background. The goal in a medical context might well be the diagnosis and therapy of an individual patient; in the case of this project it was the creation of meaningful communication – that is, the representation of the work of fashion designers and models through photography.

One of the most important exponents of this technique, Professor Henk Schmidt³ of the Limbourg Medical University in Maastricht, Netherlands, gave the best initial summary of it in a 1993 publication. As part of his staff training in Switzerland, Max had the privilege to be exposed to these ideas at about the time they were mooted and they became a part of his largely intuitive teaching practice. On reflection, this was also the case for Margo.

According to Schmidt, Problem Based Learning Groups function as follows:

- initial analysis of the problem and activation of prior knowledge through small-group discussion
- elaboration on prior knowledge and active processing of new information
- restructuring of knowledge, construction of a semantic network
- social knowledge construction
- learning in context
- stimulation of curiosity related to presentation of a relevant problem

Students in a group are invited to come up with a solution to a problem. In the exact sciences, the tutor – who acts as an external referee for the group – might have an ideal solution or set of solutions, although obviously in a creative context this will be very far from being the case.

In his 2006 paper, Schmidt succinctly stated: “Whereas many conventional curricula are focused on the acquisition and *direct* application of knowledge, Problem Based Learning is more focused on the *flexible* application of knowledge.”⁴ Flexible application is key; there were exponents of three different disciplines taking part in this creative process – designers, photographers and models, not to mention the academics. We, all of us, had to be flexible.

Often in a pressurised or formal learning environment there is a necessity to cram in all the tools of the trade, with learning directed towards a very specific and situated end, and hence tunnel vision can develop. Within this project we highlighted the need for all participants to have flexible objectives and to be prepared to work between disciplines – as collaboration is a part of life, an important part of professional and community engagement. Oddly, fashion and photography at Otago Polytechnic had not collaborated in this way previously.

We made it clear that the work undertaken would not be part of the evaluative content of the students' courses, nor could the project be compulsory, as most of it fell in the Easter break. It was also apparent that the students involved would stand to gain a great deal, as would we as academics. The gain was primarily at the level of professional practice for all parties. Collaboration meant that there would be no rugged individualism, rather a carefully arrived-at result based on discussion, on listening and reacting to the needs and tastes of others. The outcome – photographic documents – was to be a source of satisfaction to the fashion designer; the model and the photographer; and also needed to pass muster with a person, Ute, who had a vast experience in the editorial use of the medium. Note that the models are mentioned as part of the group. Drawn from the Ali McD Model Agency; they were also listened to and came in with the imperatives and cultural inputs proper to their profession.

THE PROJECT OUTLINE

Day one: cohorting

The first step, having once established the structure of the project, was to form groups. These were made up of senior students in the third year of the Bachelor of Design (Fashion) in the School of Design and the third and fourth years of the Bachelor of Fine Art programme at the Dunedin School of Art.

Groups consisted of:

- two fashion designers, who had to have a representative piece or several pieces from their collections available
- a model, and
- two photographers.

In total, the participants in this project amounted to six groups totalling 12 photographers, 13 designers and eight models, as well as numerous academics and graduates.

It was a matter of an hour in the Year 3 fashion design studio before the groups were formed. Designers and artists discussed their styles and shared their past photography and fashion design; they came together naturally with shared ideals in their fashion communication. The groups thought of suitably eccentric names – e.g., the Tree Huggers, Geek.com, the Belly Flops. The cohorts were quickly involved in lively conversation and huddled together to refine their concepts. They discussed their model needs and went back and forth between the model agency website and the academics to make their final choice. It was important that we knew the capabilities and looks that a model could achieve – the designers were clear that they needed a dark-haired Alice in Wonderland, an austere tall beauty, or a mermaid.

Day two, planning

To set the scene, Ute presented her vast collection of photography over the years, and guided the group on a tour around the exhibition. Then it was the students' turn to present, a little daunting after Ute, but all coped well. The cohorts presented their past work to the entire team. They also presented their project plans and defined the style and approach of their fashion work, the location for their shoot, the model chosen and some kind of time frame, which would enable academics and professionals to visit all the groups during the shoot.

Day three, shooting

One week later was shooting day in many and varied locations. Ute, her team and the fashion and art staff moved from location to location in well-planned manoeuvres to allow all to observe, comment and assist with the proceedings. Ute often came panting up behind to see how the shoot was going, coming in with some quality hands-on advice.

Fashion and photography staff, a very welcome Lisa Moenchmeyer from the Goethe Institute and a number of graduate students were all involved, and all helped with everything from logistics to technical pointers and tea and sympathy. Digital photography was the preferred technique as the work had to be edited and presented on the following day.



Image 3: Year 3 fashion students, (photographer: Max Oettli).



Image 4: Ute Mahler, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, (photographer: Max Oettli.)



Image 5: Assorted location shots, (photographers (left to right): Lisa Moenchmeyer, Lisa Moenchmeyer and Werner Mahler).



Image 6: Assorted location shots, (photographer: Werner Mahler).

Day four, critique

The day after the shoot a public critique afternoon was held, again at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery where the students showed their projects as PowerPoint presentations, speaking to their outcomes and getting a critical appraisal from Ute and from the entire audience.



Image 7: Critique, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, (photographer: Max Oettli).

At this time when we saw the results of the project, the quality and creativity of the images, we realised that this point could not be the end of the project. At that time we asked ourselves – what else could we do with these extraordinary images?

FASH+OGRAPHY – AN EXHIBITION

Max mooted the possibility of producing an exhibition, "FASH+OGRAPHY," at a significant contemporary Dunedin art gallery, The Blue Oyster, and the team of Max, Simon Swale and Margo put this into action. It is worth noting at this point that, from day one of the project, we made it clear to all participants that all involved in the production of the fashion communication would be credited, and the exhibition gave us the opportunity to put this directive to the test.

FINDINGS

A significant finding of the project was the variation in opinions and cultural understandings regarding the identity of the author in such a project. This variation is exemplified in two contrasting comments by the principals:

Max: "We took care in briefing the students to ensure that the collaborative nature of the project was to be signalled, with the names of the designers, models and photographers all clearly indicated on the works. It was of interest to observe that the photography students were quite happy on some occasions to forego a nominative credit and to credit their work collectively. In art we found this an interesting and refreshing retreat from the obsession with authorial art – maybe Roland Barthes was right in pronouncing the author as dead."

Margo: "Perhaps authorial art may have died from art's point of view, but who was the author? The art students clearly believed they were the authors, emblazing the digital files and prints with the names of the photographers, a copyright symbol and in some cases no mention of the other creatives involved in the process – the designer and the model."

We found that the biggest challenge for all parties involved was the need to negotiate, sometimes compromise and accommodate these different perspectives. Collaboration, while imperative to the education of designers, generated its own rewards and problems.



Image 8: Photographers Emily Hlavac-Green and Julia Johnstone; designer Jenna Dudley; model Ella B @ AliMcD.

Image 9: Photographer Tara Douglas; designer Cheska Pasco; model Pagan C @ AliMcD.





Image 10: Photographers Kate Muir and Viet Tieu; designer Nicole Hamilton; model Zoe C @AliMcD.

CONCLUSION

Feedback from the students was, in general, very positive and the cohorting of the two cultures, design and art, worked well and led to a better understanding and respect between the different partners in the enterprise. The Problem Based Learning Group's approach, which we had already both applied instinctively to teaching elsewhere, seemed to be the perfect solution to this situation, with collaborative groups falling into place and getting on with the work, tackling the right questions without getting lost in a labyrinth of irrelevant questions.

The downside – which we feel needs to be addressed – was firstly a feeling of exclusion by the handful of students in both art and design who, for personal or employment reasons, were unable to be part of this experience. It is impossible to make participation in a project outside of the school year compulsory, of course, and the cohesive and pedagogical effect on those students who could participate, in terms of their future motivation and knowledge, made this a somewhat difficult situation to manage in day-to-day teaching during the rest of the year. Gaps were there and were rather obvious.

Another issue was the ownership of the images and the overriding necessity of ensuring a common understanding of what ownership (or authorship) means, as well as ensuring clear communication throughout the entire project, from conception through to the undeterminable end.

As academics, we found that too much enthusiasm shown at the start of the project gave us the difficulty of finding the time and commitment necessary for the final productions, exhibition, exhibition booklet and DVD – all of which made nigh-impossible demands on staff and senior students at a time when end-of-year commitments began to loom on our academic horizons.

In sum, the "Fash + Photog" project resulted in:

- vibrant engagement between design and art students, models, academics and professionals;
- a better understanding of and respect for the different perspectives of those involved;
- a flexible and evolutionary development of educational learnings; and
- the physical outputs of several photoshoots, exhibitions and a publication.

Although these particular phases of the collaborative project between design and art at Otago Polytechnic have been completed, the dialogue continues. The next chapter will encompass more participants and perspectives, as is the nature of action research.

Max Oettli has been active as a photographer, writer and teacher for four decades. He studied humanities at Auckland and Geneva universities, and worked for five years at the Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland, and for three decades in Geneva, Switzerland, as an architectural photographer. He has numerous exhibitions, publications and other projects to his name.

Margo Barton teaches in the fields of fashion design, fashion communication and millinery. She is currently undertaking her PhD through fashion at RMIT University, Melbourne. Her research and practice focuses on the use of new media and CAD technologies and their potential within a millinery design context.

- 1 FC Gundlach, E Kaufhold, et al., *Zeitgeist Becomes Form, German Fashion Photography 1945-95* (Stuttgart, Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, nd).
- 2 FH von Donnersmarck, *The Lives of Others* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2006).
- 3 HG Schmidt, "Foundations of Problem-based Learning: Some Explanatory Notes," in *Medical Education*, 27:5 (1993), 422-32.
- 4 HG Schmidt, SMM Loyens, et al., "Problem-Based Learning is Compatible with Human Cognitive Architecture: Commentary on Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006)," *Educational Psychologist*, 42:2 (2007), 91-7.